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Beverly Buchanan "I Broke the House" at gta exhibitions — ETH Zurich
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Prefacing the main gallery space at ETH Zürich is a large wall covered in handwritten statements. These proclamations, filled with caustic sarcasm about the exclusionary pitfalls of the art world, are taken from artist Beverly Buchanan's (1940–2015) undated publication *I Hope This Helps You Survive Your Gallery Visit*, and offer the viewer a playfully ironic introduction to the exhibition. As its title—*I Broke the House*, a phrase drawn from one of Buchanan's artist publications—lays bare, the notion of decay serves as a primary aesthetic and theoretical principle by which the artist explored systemic racial, gender, and socioeconomic injustices through the prism of her own lived experience as a Black queer woman. ¹

Curated by the gta exhibitions team (Elena Bally, Fredi Fischli, and Niels Olsen) at the Swiss architecture school ETH Zürich and developed in close collaboration with a variety of US institutional partners, this exhibition is the first in Europe to foreground Buchanan, whose institutional recognition in the United States only emerged in recent years. ² An extensive public program involving curators, writers, and theorists (Anna Gritz, Siddhartha Mitter, Jack Halberstam, and others) helps create a dialogical framework for the exhibition. Buchanan's five-decade oeuvre is showcased in the main gallery space through her paintings, sculptures, videos, as well as archival documentation and enters into dialogue with works by other artists both historical such as Ana Mendieta and Kazuko Miyamoto and contemporary like Aria Dean, Devin T. Mays and Cameron Rowland.

Born in Fuquay, North Carolina, in 1940, Beverly Buchanan spent her childhood years in South Carolina. She moved to New York in the early 1960s to study science at Columbia University, and later worked in the public health sector in both New York City and East Orange, New Jersey. In 1971 she started attending the Art Students League, where she would encounter former members of the Spiral Group, a New York–based Black artist collective active from 1963 to 1965. Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden in particular would have a profound influence on her. *I Broke the House* opens with Buchanan’s initial experiments from this time. In this early stage, she started exploring the tropes of Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by *City Walls* (mid- to late 1970s), a series of abstract paintings and drawings of walls, predominantly depicted in black, which aimed to replicate the erosion that then permeated New York’s architectural fabric. She then extended her interest in decay to minimalist sculpture, as evidenced in the series *Frustula* (1978–80). Derived from the Latin word for “fragment,” these works also aimed to depict urban ruin through found bricks used as molds for casting concrete and pulverized rocks as pigments. Through abstract forms, whether through paint or sculpture, Buchanan sought to develop a new artistic language that would both capture the disenfranchised experience of urban life at that time and offer potential toward her own agency. 3

Leaving her career in public health to fully dedicate herself to art, Buchanan moved to Georgia in 1977 and extended the methods of her earlier sculptures to site-specific environmental installations. Presented in the exhibition through archival materials are four of her seven known public works: *Ruins and Rituals* (1979), *Marsh Ruins* (1981), *Unity Stones* (1983), and *Blue Stations Stones* (1985–86). Made of stones, concrete, and tabby (a local building material comprised of oyster shells, sand, and water, brought to the Americas from Africa by European colonial settlers), these small to medium-scale anti-monumental works were demurely placed in public spaces, in some cases hidden in plain sight, without any accompanying explanation. The locations, however, suggest deliberate intent, charged as they are with the historical violence of settler colonialism and slavery. *Ruins and Rituals* indeed was installed on the grounds of the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Macon, a site formerly home to the Harry Sitwell Edwards Arboretum, named after the Macon-born novelist and poet known for his pro-slavery novel *Eneas Africanus* (1919). *Marsh Ruins* itself is located along the Georgia coast in the Marshes of Glynn Overlook Park, a name borrowed from the 1879 poem *Marshes of Glynn* by Confederate veteran Sidney Lanier. The park is also located on the very site of the 1803 Igbo Landing, a powerful moment of resistance to enslavement by Igbo captives from West Africa.

While much of the recent literature on Buchanan focuses on her *Frustula* works and her public installations, her *Shack* series, spanning from the mid-1980s until the end of her life, marks a shift in form and meaning. 4 Made of materials found locally, such as cardboard, metal, and wood, the sculptures represent the makeshift houses of local sharecroppers. Buchanan viewed them as portraits of their inhabitants, some imagined and others she encountered throughout her life. They act as a poetic tribute to disenfranchised communities in the US South. 5

Reflecting on the history of racial, socioeconomic, and political violence in the U S, Buchanan continuously challenged and transcended dominant artistic tropes of her time, from Abstract

self, from the early painterly works, which she described as being “in her image,” to her processes of amassing, building, and placing, physically and performatively engaging the body. Personal yet collective, fragmented yet imposing, Buchanan’s artistic language poignantly challenges dominant power structures.

A particularly successful aspect of the exhibition is its inclusion of other voices that echo Buchanan’s aesthetic and theoretical language. In featuring artists such as Ana Mendieta and Kazuko Miyamoto, the exhibition provides context to Buchanan’s early work and underscores its historical significance. All three were included in the seminal 1980 exhibition *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Artists* at the women’s cooperative gallery A.I.R. in New York which sought to explore the politics of aesthetics from the position of self-identifying Third World women artists.

Also present in the exhibition are works by contemporary artists such as Aria Dean, Devin T. Mays, and Cameron Rowland that constitute a powerful statement on the continued relevance of Buchanan’s work. Devin T. Mays’s recent site-specific *Reference Material* (2024), consisting of wooden pole-like structures, offers a nod to her practice by anchoring yet puncturing the space. Aria Dean’s 2024 installation *Monte Verita Kudzu Spread* consists of a tarp laid on the gallery floor containing kudzu, a plant found throughout the South, known for its resilience and interpreted here as a symbol of Blackness, echoing Buchanan’s environmental installations and their relations to landscape and place. Adorning the edge of the main door of the exhibition space is Cameron Rowland’s *7.5'* (2015), a measuring strip reminiscent of those typically seen in gas stations and convenience stores, used by surveillance systems to track the heights of potential malfeasants. Positioned strategically as visitors exit the exhibition, it serves as a counterpoint to Buchanan’s handwritten reflections encountered upon entering, and draws attention to the institutional apparatus within which both artists operate. “What is created when something comes apart?” the exhibition text posits. Perhaps some answers might lie in Akwugo Emejulu’s recent theory of “fugitive feminism,” wherein the position of the fugitive is seen as liberating within the prism of Black feminist discourse. To me, it finds an echo in Buchanan’s furtive evasions of dominant forms of representation and understanding so as to yield new meaning and agency. 6

at gta exhibitions — ETH Zurich
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